DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 760 CS 207 059

AUTHOR Barbatsis, Gretchen S.
TITLE The Real-Life-Referent as a Standard for News Perspective Bias.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (65th, Athens, OH, July 25-28, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bias; *Mass Media Effects; *News Reporting; Research Methodology; Social Problems; *Television; *Television Research
IDENTIFIERS *News Perspective Bias

ABSTRACT

The concept of news perspective bias necessitates the creation of an empirical standard by which to judge that bias. A study defined and tested a real life referent applicable to planned, sustained news events that have identifiable and accessible participants. The study compared the television news coverage of court ordered busing to achieve racial integration in the public school system of a large midwestern city with the perceptions of the students involved. News content came from the local affiliates of the three commercial television networks, and referent content came from students in a video communication project who were taught to use video equipment and then told to prepare tapes about their experience with the busing. Content categories were developed from both sets of tapes, and the kind and degree of bias was determined by comparing the newscasts to the students' material. Specific results obtained from this data are less important for themselves than for their implications for the concept of the real life referent. Although more difficult to apply than to advocate, the real life referent does directly address important issues of surveillance. (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED219760

THE REAL-LIFE-REFERENT AS A STANDARD FOR NEWS PERSPECTIVE BIAS

Gretchen S. Barbatsis

Department of Telecommunication
Michigan State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gretchen S. Barbatsis

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS207059

Presented to the Radio-Television Journalism Division, Association for Education in Journalism, annual convention, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, July 1982

The Real-life-referent as a Standard for
News Perspective Bias

Abstract

Results of news production research argue for a recognition of the manufactured nature of news. This literature introduces the concept of news perspective bias, but does not provide an empirical standard by which it can be recognized and measured in news content.

The study reported here defines a strategy for assessing news perspective bias. The strategy operationalizes the concept of the real-life-referent as a standard by the delineation of method and event criteria. The strategy is applied to an event of court ordered busing.

Content samples from television news and materials produced by a referent sample are analyzed for the kind of bias represented in news content and the degree of bias represented by differences between news content and referent content. Interpretation of results is discussed in terms of theoretical assumptions of a real-life-referent standard as a measure of news perspective bias.

The Real-life-referent as a Standard for News Perspective Bias

Research of the last decade which has focused on the process of television news production raises new issues for those concerned with monitoring the press.[1] Unlike a conception of news as the 'product of events', this literature proposes that news is the result of a systematic perspective that news organizations take to events.[2] Arguing, as this perspective does, that organizational, economic, or personal factors influence the way news is reported is, of course, not new. Whether from a focus on the institution[3] or the individual reporter,[4] gatekeeper studies reflect a longstanding recognition that news is the product of selectivity and decision-making. What is new, however, is the perspective that the way an event is rendered by the news is not necessarily just the result of individual application of or deviation from principles of professional journalism, but, rather, the result of a systematic bias in the news production process itself.

If not seen as pejorative, an argument that news is manufactured introduces a new perspective from which to evaluate and judge the adequacy of news. It presents a situation rather like that of turning a kaleidoscope: the components are the same, but the pattern of relationships is different. Many of the usual standards used to recognize bias do not address the questions raised by this new set of patterns. If news perspective reflects a systematic bias, for example, the concepts of structural or political bias do not constitute

bias under this condition.[5] An issue raised for surveillance research is one of detecting how this new conceptualization of bias can be recognized and measured in news content. Addressing this issue requires both definition of an appropriate referent for comparison and development of an empirical standard.[6]

The concept of a real-life-referent has been advocated in studies attempting to compare a news product to the raw material of an event from which it was constructed.[7] While this approach identifies an appropriate referent for investigating news perspective bias, however, it has lacked definition of an empirical standard by which this kind of bias can be recognized and measured.

It was the purpose of this study to develop the concept of a real-life-referent as an empirical standard and to demonstrate its use by application to a particular news event. As with standards developed to identify political and structural bias, the proposed standard for detecting news perspective bias was defined as one of method.[8] The standard was delineated by both method and event criteria.

Real-life-referent Standard: Definition

Method criteria

A method of detecting bias using the real-life-referent as a standard was defined by three criteria: contiguous data collection, representative sample selection, and comparable instrumentation.

Contiguous data collection requires collection of data from people experiencing an event during the same period of time that reporters collect materials for news production. This criterion rules out retrospective data from participants, and requires off-air taping or archival access to news programs during the period of study.

Representative sample selection requires procedures for selecting news programs and materials from participants which assure a representative sample of both populations. For a news sample this requires taping all news programs during the period of study and randomly selecting a sample for analysis. For a referent sample, this criterion requires a random selection of participants from an identified referent population and a random selection of content from the materials they produce.

Comparable instrumentation requires development of strategies for obtaining materials from a referent which can be subjected to the same content analysis as a news product. This criterion requires use of the same system of content categories for analysis of materials from both samples.

Event criteria

Not all events which become news are amenable to a research design which meets the criteria of a method defined above. Three criteria were established to describe the kinds of events which would seem most suitable for study using a real-life-referent standard: they are planned to occur, they are sustained over a period of time, and they have identifiable and accessable subpopulations of participants.

Criteria of being planned and sustained are necessary for designing strategies by which participants in the event produce materials for analysis. Planned events include such things as political conventions, court ordered actions, or labor strikes. This criterion excludes such spontaneous events as assassinations, fires or accidents.

Events which are sustained over a period of time may include either those planned to occur or those which take on the characteristic of predictable continued occurrence. The Iranian hostage situation or the Love Canal controversy would have qualified as the latter type.

Ability to secure materials for analysis requires access to a subpopulation of participants in an event. In the case of a political convention, for example, subpopulations might be caucuses identified on the basis of race, sex, region or candidate. In the case of a strike, subpopulations might be defined as workers, union leaders or management. Because not all subpopulations will provide access for study, results and, thus, a description of bias, will necessarily be limited to the perspectives of those who do.

Real-life-referent: Application

News perspective bias was investigated in a study of an event resulting from court ordered busing to achieve racial integration in the public school system of a large Midwestern city. The event as constructed by television news was compared to a construction by participants in the event.

Event

The event met defined event criteria. A plan for implementation of a busing order with specifications for the first year of operation was in place. Numerous subpopulations were identifiable, including teachers, students, administrators and parents.

The subpopulation chosen as a referent was students.[9] The portion of the event studied was the first semester (four months) in which busing was implemented.

Materials

News content was generated by three commercial television network affiliates in the market. Weekly evening news programs for each station were video-tape-recorded for the first two weeks of each of the four months of study.[10]

A video communication project was designed as the strategy for obtaining referent content. Students were introduced to video as a medium which, like a telephone, letter or audio tape, could be used to communicate with others, and taught how to use portable video equipment. From this perspective and with the skills to use the equipment, students were asked to prepare video messages to be exchanged with classes in other schools. Other than the direction that the topic of the messages was to be their experience with busing, students were not restricted in the format or the sources used in production of the tapes. Tapes were exchanged and viewed by students in other classes participating in the project. Tapes were produced throughout the semester.

Sample: Referent

A stratified random sampling procedure was used to select the schools from which participants in the event were identified. Schools were categorized by attendance patterns resulting from the busing plan, and one school was selected from each category. The sample included four schools: a high school in a black neighborhood attended voluntarily by whites from outside the neighborhood; a high school in a white neighborhood attended voluntarily by blacks from outsdie the neighborhood; a magnet school attended voluntarily by both blacks and whites; and a junior high school attended by assignment by both blacks and whites

One class within each school was selected by identifying a teacher who was willing to incorporate the video communication project into his/her class instruction. Neither students nor teachers were aware that the project was part of a news surveillance study.

Sample: Content

Television news. One of three programs for each of the days taped was randomly selected for analysis All news stories with direct or indirect reference to the event created by the court order to bus students to achieve integration were identified, timed, and transferred to a master tape. The sample consisted of 30 news items, representing 49 minutes and 30 seconds of programming. News items appeared throughout the four month period of study.

Referent tapes. The amount of content to be analyzed from student tapes was set by the number of items and total time of the content sample representing news. Tapes from each school were allocated approximately

one-fourth of the total time (49:30) and total number of items (30). A random sample of one-half, one, one-and-one-half, and two-minute spots was selected in the same proportion as those units appeared in the news sample. Selected spots were transferred to a master tape.

Unit of analysis

Television news. The news item, defined as a story that was complete on its own, was specified as the unit of analysis. The news item was usually characterized by an anchor lead-in, an on-location reporter, and a filmed interview with an information source.

Referent tapes. The unit of analysis for the referent material was a spot within a tape, defined by the durations of the news items in the news sample. The unit included one-half, one, one-and-one-half, and two-minute durations. The unit included portions of panel discussions, formal and informal interviews, dramatic segments, and cinema verite approaches used by the students in the design of their messages.

Instrumentation

Content categories were generated from both sets of video materials. A class of twenty college seniors majoring in communication viewed the entire set of news programs and student produced tapes. Themes and information sources were identified from which content categories were defined for the coding instrument.

The instrument included five sets of categories: content source, subject, dimension, duration, and information source (see Figure I). Subject categories represented the eight themes identified by preliminary

analysis. Dimension categories indicated whether the subject content represented a positive, negative, or neutral aspect of the theme, and duration categories indicated the amount of time devoted to each theme. Each unit was given an eleven digit code based on these five sets of categories.

- - - - - - - - - - -
insert Figure I here
- - - - - - - - - - -

If a unit contained more than one theme it was coded for the most predominant one. A similar decision was made for dimension. With the exception of news personnel, multiple information sources within a unit were coded. The category of newspersonnel was used only if there were no other sources in the unit.

Judges

Two graduate students in communication received instruction in use of the coding instrument and practice on selections of content from both sets of materials not included in the samples for analysis. Content in the samples was independently coded by the two judges. Interrater agreement was .90 for theme categories, .82 for dimension categories, and 1.0 for source and duration categories.

Analysis

Analysis of the data was designed to describe two aspects of news perspective bias: kind and degree. A profile of the attributes of news content provided a description of kind of bias. A comparison of the attributes of news content to the attributes of referent content

provided a description of degree of bias.

Relative frequencies were computed to determine the proportion of themes, time per theme, information sources, and dimensions of the themes presented in news content. In addition, contingency tables were generated to analyze the relationship of themes to time (3 x 4) and to dimension (3 x 3). Chi-square was used to test the significance of differences.

Comparison of the news sample to the referent sample was designed to describe the degree of relationship of the news perspective to the referent. Three contingency tables were generated to analyze the relationship of themes (2 x 3), time per theme (2 x 3), and dimension of themes (2 x 3). Chi-square was used to test the significance of differences.

Results

The perspective of the event represented by news content was characterized by a focus on technical aspects of busing (see Table 1), an emphasis on officials as sources of information (see Table 2), and a negative dimension of the subjects presented (see Table 3).

- - - - - - - - - - - - - -
insert Tables 1, 2, 3 here
- - - - - - - - - - - - - -

As shown in Table 1, management of the bus schedule, enrollment patterns, and court processes accounted for 70 percent of the subjects presented in the news and 72.5 percent of news time devoted to busing.

As shown in Table 2, officials in general accounted for 71 percent of the information sources presented in the news, with school officials representing the greatest proportion. As shown in Table 3, 50 percent of the content was a negative aspect of the subject presented. No significant differences were found between the frequency of themes and the amount of time per theme, or between the frequency of themes and the dimension from which they were presented for either sample.

News content differed from that of the referent in the subject focus of the content ($p < .001, df=2$) and the proportion of time devoted to the subjects ($p < .001, df=2$), but not in the dimension of the themes presented. This difference, based on data in Table 1, is represented graphically in Figure II.

- - - - - - - - - - - -
insert Figure II here
- - - - - - - - - - - -

Of the subjects appearing in the two samples, the greatest difference occurred for themes addressing technical aspects of busing. While 70 percent of news content was accounted for by this subject, only 3 percent of referent content was. Difference between the subject of effects was also quite large, the themes in this category accounting for only 20 percent of news content but 60 percent of referent content. Difference for the subject reflecting the quality of the event was less, but still significant, accounting for 10 percent of news content, but 37 percent of referent content.

The nature of the difference between the two samples for the proportion of time devoted to a theme was the same as that for frequency of themes (see Table 1 and Figure II).

There was no significant difference in the dimensions of the themes presented by the news content. Both referent and news content presented predominantly negative aspects of the event.

Discussion

An event of court ordered busing provided a context for application of a real-life-referent standard to investigation of news perspective bias. Media coverage of busing, however, although certainly a worthy issue,[11] was not the major focus of this study. The purpose was, rather, to use that event to demonstrate how a real-life-referent standard might be used to recognize and measure news perspective bias. Discussion will focus then, not on the results generated from this study, but, rather on implications of the assumptions of a real-life-referent standard for interpretations of results in general.

The first assumption is one of design. As with studies of structural and political bias, the purpose of comparing two sets of content data is to make a judgement of performance.[12] Although superficially similar to a design comparing content produced by two or more sources, the conceptual distinction is important. In the latter the purpose of analysis is to relate the attributes of two sources to the difference in content produced. The purpose of a design to detect bias, however, is to evaluate the effect of the attributes of the source (i.e., a news organization) on performance (i.e., the news program) according to a standard (i.e., a norm).

A second assumption concerns the standard. In a structural or political approach to bias, the standard for judging bias is derived from the content data. A total sample of news content provides the norm against which an individual source of content is measured.[13] A real-life-referent standard, on the other hand, is a noncontent index in that it is not derived from news content. It is similar to standards derived from expert opinion, in this case, experts on the event. Implications of this difference for interpretation of results are twofold.

First, while the method of sampling a subpopulation and the content that sample produces reduces the effect of individual predisposition, the subpopulation itself represents a certain perspective of the event. Theoretically, the standard could be representative of the event by aggregate data from all relevant subpopulations. As a practical matter, however, problems of access would usually mean that the standard represents a subpopulation, not an event, and results must be interpreted as such. The relevance of the judgement of bias will depend on the relevance of the subpopulation to the event.

Second, because the standard derives from a different source of content than the news, the comparison is of different entities and differences are assumed. It is not the difference, but the degree of difference that is being measured by the real-life-referent standard. If the news content differs significantly from a referent standard, the effect of news perspective bias on news content can be identified.

A third assumption is one of content research in general. A description of bias resulting from use of a real-life-referent standard does not address either the causes or the consequences of that bias. The former is the role of production research, the latter of effects research.[14] Use of a real-life-referent standard is particularly useful, however, in the relationship of content research to both production and effects designs. On the one hand, observation of the news production process defines factors which predict the way an event might be constructed by the media. News content itself provides a test of these predictions, but only for the aspects of the event that were presented. Content from a referent provides an added perspective of some of the aspects not presented. On the other hand, identification of both what was presented and was not presented in news content could provide specific directions for testing the effects of news content on viewers. One might predict, for example, a disconfirmation of personal experience for subpopulations whose perception of an event differed significantly from a news presentation of the event, and a confirmation for those not differing significantly. Or, one might predict differing judgements of news credibility along the same patterns. In either case, direction for testing the concepts is provided by the added perspective of the referent data.

Conclusion

Research concerned with evaluating the performance of the press has generally been motivated by two assumptions: First, that to inform adequately

news should be as free from bias as is humanly possible; second, that the average news consumer is not equipped to perform the responsibility of identifying whether and how bias may occur.[15] Investigation of news perspective bias seems particularly relevant to these assumptions. Barring participation in an event, a consumer of news has virtually no access to the kind of information necessary to critically evaluate the effect of the news production process on the news product.

Recognition that analysis of news perspective bias will always be limited by the elusive nature of the event as referent should not deter this important area of surveillance research. As a practical matter, the limitation is necessarily one of perspective. As this study has demonstrated, however, it need not be one of method. Although certainly easier to advocate than to apply, a real-life-referent standard addresses most directly the issues of surveillance raised by a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of news.

REFERENCES

[1]A. Smith, "Is Objectivity Obsolete?" Columbia Journalism Review, 61-65 (May/June 1980).

[2]D. Altheide, Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1976);

G. Bailey and L. Lichty, "Rough Justice on a Saigon Street: A Gatekeeper Study of NBC's Tet Execution Film," Journalism Quarterly, 49: 221-229 (Summer 1972);

E. Epstein, News from Nowhere: Television and the News, (New York: Random House, 1973);

T. Patterson and R. McClure, The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Politics, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976).

[3]J. K. Buckalew, "News Elements and Selection by Television News Editors," Journal of Broadcasting, 14: 47-54 (1969-70);

J. P. Harless, "Mailcall: A Case Study of a Broadcast News Gatekeeper," Journalism Quarterly, 51: 87-90 (1974);

J. Demmick, "The Gatekeeper: An Uncertainty Theory," Journalism Monographs, 37: 1-37 (1974);

C. R. Hofstetter and T. F. Buss, "Bias in Television News Coverage of Political Events: A Methodological Analysis," Journal of Broadcasting, 22: 517-530 (Fall 1978);

M. W. Singletary, "What Determines the News: A Review of the Scientific Research on News Values," ANPA News Research Report, No. 5 (August 12, 1977);

S. S. Whitlow, "Women in the Newsroom: A Role Theory View," Journalism Quarterly, 56: 378-383 (Summer 1979).

[4]B. Roshco, Newsmaking, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975);

G. Tuchman, "Telling Stories," Journal of Communication, 26: 93-97 (Autumn 1976);

D. L. Schwantes and J. B. Lemert, "Media Access as a Function of Source Group Identify," Journalism Quarterly, 55: 772-775 (Winter 1978);

S. H. Schwartz, "Inner-directed and Outer-directed Values of Professional Journalists," Journalism Quarterly, 55: 721-725 (Winter 1978);

C. A. Broh, "Horse-race Journalism: Reporting the Polls in the 1976 Presidential Election," Public Opinion Quarterly, 44: 514-529 (Winter 1980);

E. Damsker, J. R. Wilcox, and G. N. VanTubergen, "How Reporters Evaluate the Credibility of their Sources," Newspaper Research Journal, 1: 40-45 (February 1980).

[5]C. R. Hofstetter, Bias in the News: Network Television Coverage of the 1972 Election Campaign, (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1976).

[6]G. Comstock and R. Cobbey, "Watching the Watchdogs: Trends and Proglems in Monitoring Network News," in W. Adams and F. Schreibman (eds.), Television Network News: Issues in Content Research, (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 1978), pp. 47-63.

[7]K. Lang and G. Lang, "The Unique Perspective of Television and its Effect: A Pilot Study," American Sociological Review, 18: 3-12 (February 1953);

D. Paletz and M. Elson, "Television Coverage of Presidential Conventions: Now You See It, Now You Don't," Political Science Quarterly, 91: 103-131 (Spring 1976);

N. Sayre, "Reflections on the Tube," Columbia Journalism Review, 29-35 (September/October 1980).

[8]G. Comstock and R. Cobbey, p. 60.

[9]The selection of this subpopulation was based on considerations of relevancy to the event and access. Like teachers, students represented a subpopulation most affected by the event on a day-to-day basis. Unlike teachers, they were not in the employ of a system committed to making the plan work peacefully. Administrators and parents presented a problem of access, the former political, the latter logistic.

[10]Although types of news items have been found to vary within the days of the week, there does not appear to be a pattern which would bias a sample based on weeks within a month. See, O. Holsti, Content Analysis for Social Sciences and Humanities, (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 127-135.

[11]M. Weinberg and G. Martin (eds.), Covering the Desegregation Story: Current Experiences and Issues, (Evanston, Illinois: Center for Equal Education, 1976),

E. Diamond, "Boston: The Agony of Responsibility," Columbia Journalism Review, 9-15 (January/February 1975);

C. Rossell, "The Effect of Community Leadership and Media on Public Behavior," Theory into Practice, 17: 131-139 (April 1978).

[12]For a discussion of message analysis designs see O. Holsti, pp. 24-41.

[13]See O. Holsti, p. 31 and K. Krippendorf, Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1980), pp. 113-114.

[14]W. Adams, "Network News Research in Perspective: A Bibliographic Essay," in W. Adams and F. Schreibman (eds.), Television Network News: Issues in Content Research, pp. 11-46.

[15]G. Comstock and R Cobbey, 1978, pp. 47-48.

Table 1
Content Themes

Subjects/themes	Television News		Referent	
	% of Content	% of Time	% of Content	% of Time
Technical aspects				
Operation of buses	43.3 %	51.5%	0.0 %	0.0 %
Enrollment patterns	13.3	13.0	0	0
Court processes	13.3	8.0	3.3	3.0
Effects				
Community	13.3	13.5	0	0
Individual	3.3	4.6	46.7	49.5
Classroom	3.3	4.0	13.3	15.0
Quality				
Peaceful	3.3	2.0	13.3	13.0
Violent	6.6	3.0	23.3	19.0

Table 2
Sources of Information

Source	Percent of all sources	
	Television News	Referent
Officials		
School	57.0 %	20.0 %
Bus company	9.1	0
Community group	2.3	0
Elected	2.3	0
Students	4.5 *	80.0 **
Parents	6.8 *	0
News personnel	18.0	0

* all related to private schools
** all related to public schools

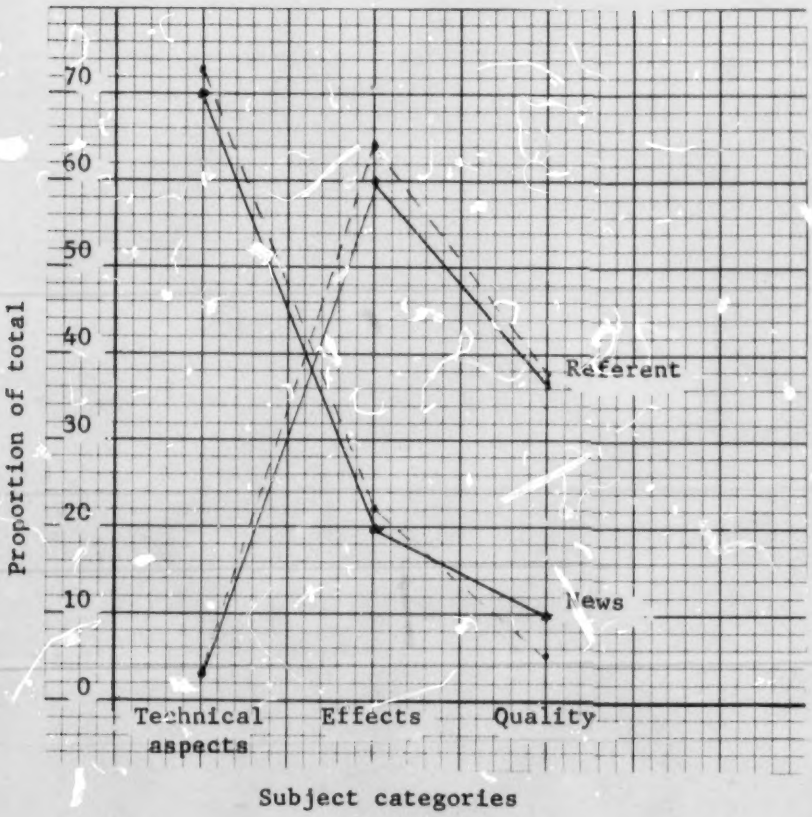
Table 3
Dimension of Theme

	Percent of Content	
	Television News	Referent
Positive	30 %	30 %
Neutral	20	10
Negative	50	60

Figure I
Categories for Content Code

Content Source	Subject	Information Source	Dimension	Duration
digit 1	digit 2-3	digit 4-9	digit 10	digit 11
1 news 2 referent	1 Technical aspects 1 operation of buses 2 enrollment 3 court processes 2 Effects 1 community 2 individual 3 classroom 3 Quality 1 peaceful 2 violent	1 Official 1 school 2 bus company 3 community group 4 elected 2 Student 1 public 2 private 3 Parent 1 public 2 private 4 News personnel	1 positive 2 neutral 3 negative	1 30 seconds 2 60 seconds 3 90 seconds 4 120 seconds

Figure II
Content Themes



—— Proportion of content subjects
--- proportion of time